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ABSTRACT

Harcum Junior College (Pennsylvania) continuously engages in institutional self-study through its comprehensive Institutional Research (IR) program. The IR Office conducts both decision-oriented research, where the problem is defined by the decision-maker, and conclusion-oriented research, where the items studied are selected by the researcher. Harcum uses a program area checklist to outline the scope of topics to be included in the research effort and to give direction to both the scheduled, cyclical research conducted for long-range trend analysis and planning, and the short-term inquiries conducted for immediate decision-making purposes. Staff and faculty suggest additional timely topics. In the past 15 years, survey research, involving the collection of data by questionnaires or interviews, made up 38% of the 661 research documents written; experimental research, employing experimental manipulation of selected independent variables, made up 60%; and historical research, involving the use of historical data to answer specific questions, made up 12%. IR reports are routinely disseminated through formal research reports, monthly newsletters, and bulletins to students, staff, faculty, alumnae, parents, and high school counselors. The IR effort has been of practical value to Harcum by filling information gaps and enabling effective self-evaluation. (DD)

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A Junior College Comprehensive Institutional Research Program

Boris Blai

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A Junior College
Comprehensive Institutional Research Program

In their article, "Junior College Institutional Research, the State of the Art" (ERIC document 021557) J.E.Roeuche and J.R.Boggs note:

> "An institution of higher learning that stops growing, improving, implementing, and evaluating, is a danger both to society and to itself. What right does an institution have to exist when it no longer gives its best in attempting to cope with the increasing complexities of the society it serves? What hope is there for a faculty, either administrative or teaching, that has stopped growing."

Within the above framework, it has been self-evident to the management at Harcum Junior College, (a private, independent, junior college for young women), that a college must continuously analyze its approaches, methods, and programs to insure the best possible education for its students. As a matter of college management policy, Harcum has consistently, and systematically, questioned the effects of its efforts. It has gathered data through a variety of self-evaluation studies, utilizing the results in decisions by management, faculty, and staff personnel. This on-going assessment process is the institutional research effort which may conveniently be defined as self-study by the college designed to improve the insitution.

Such research grows out of the need to obtain data necessary to make intelligent, informed, and objective decisions regarding the management and operations of the organization. It does not limit itself to any particular aspect of the organization, nor is it entirely limited to one organizational element. For example, at Harcum, institutional research (IR) is a shared activity. Members of the staff, faculty, and administration, actively participate in various IR inquiries, investigations, and studies. The extent of such participation is evidenced in the following facts:

First - faculty participate in policy deliberations. This is achieved primarily through their active service as members of four standing committees, academic division meetings, the faculty assembly, and the faculty senate. During a recent representative year, a total of 72

policy and procedures actions were recommended for approval by these various groups. Of this total, 21 involved research inquiries by faculty members, the results of which were documented in reports.

Second - in direct response to requests from various faculty committees, during this same period the Office of Research conducted 14 additional studies, furnishing reports to the committees to facilitate the formulation of recommendations based upon objective, relevant data.

Third - the Office of Research has wholeheartedly subscribed to the view that successful linkage between educational research and educational practice is achieved when the user and the researcher interact collaboratively, thereby stimulating each other's problem-solving behavior. Overall direction, control, and enthusiastic support of the institutional research program at Harcum has been provided by the president, Dr. Michael A. Duzy. He, along with members of the faculty, staff, and administrative personnel, as well as members of the student body, also have served as valuable sources for suggesting timely research topics for investigation. Typically, however, the major impetus for the day to day institutional research activities has come from the Office of Research which has addressed itself to both decision-oriented and conclusion-oriented research inquiries, the latter comprising 90% of the total research effort.

In such conclusion-oriented inquiries, the items studied have been selected by the researcher with the freedom to revise the approaches when deemed appropriate. On the other hand, in the decision-oriented inquiries, the problems investigated have been defined by the appropriate decision-maker; that is, the president, staff member, administrators, or faculty members. Consequently, the research investigator conducts his decision-oriented study within the framework of the decision-maker's judgement.

Organizationally, the Director of Research reports directly to the President, operating within the framework of the following duties and responsibilities:

(1) he is responsible for the development and conduct of the centralized institutional research function at the college; (2) in addition, he provides leadership stimulation, assistance, and coordination of research studies conducted by other college personnel in order to avoid wasteful duplication of effort; (3) research inquiries are broad-guaged, to embrace activities necessary for the systematic, ongoing evaluation of the college's educational effectiveness - ascertaining the extent to which the college achieves its self-imposed objectives; (4) in addition, to the extent feasible, the Office of Research conducts, or joins with other college personnel in conducting theoretical research inquiries designed to expand the knowledge in the complex field of teaching-learning; (5) at the direction of the president, conducts institutional research studies which may embrace any dimension of college operations; (6) both in the planning and conduct of institutional research activities, he must constantly strive for the widest possible participation of faculty, administration, and staff personnel; and (7) the fundamental responsibility and objective of the institutional research program, which rests with the Director of Research, is to provide appropriate college personnel with definitive, accurate data to assist them in making sound decisions and choices.

To insure that the institutional research program is both systematic and comprehensive, it is essential to develop a program area check list. This serves to broadly delineate the scope of topics to be included in the ongoing research effort. For Harcum, the following has served as a valuable guide. It has given direction to both the scheduled, cyclical research conducted for long-range trends analysis and planning, as well as the 'on-the-spur-of-the-moment' inquiries conducted for immediate decision-making purposes.

Planning for educational self-renewal through long-range institutional research has been an integral part of Harcum's management policy. To insure that students might have more and better opportunities to learn, the College has

sought to generate and maintain, on a continuing basis, the capacity for self-renewal. Through the modification of existing programs it has sought to adapt to change. In the words of the former U.S. Commissioner of Education, James Allen ..."Such educational self-renewal seeks to change attitudes; to throw off inhibiting tradition; and to be willing to experiment and explore new methods and directions."

Harcum subscribes to the belief that such educational renewal, in large measure, is accomplished through a vigorous institutional research effort. Instant solutions to immediate problems are not part of this self-renewal process. However, the resolution of such immediate problems has also been an active concern of both faculty and administration at the College. Combined, these two related functions have been the dual thrusts of the total institutional research effort.

Undoubtedly additions can be made to the following IR inquiries listing. For Harcum, it has served admirably.

First area - administration. This includes such subjects as self-evaluation, district organization, student personnel, policy development, staffing, year-round operations, committee organization, personnel services, articulation with business - high schools - transfer students, calendar development, catalog structure, questionnaires, regulations and instructions, reporting procedures, and summer/evening sessions.

Second area - admissions and enrollment. Representative dimensions here include: counseling procedures, admissions process, enrollment projection, placement test validity, prediction of success, probation, course enrollments - screening - selection procedures.

Third area - curriculum. Such elements as curriculum revision and needs, remedial programs, honors programs, individual and overall program evaluations and library.

Fourth grouping - faculty. To include such matters as inservice training

needs, academic rights and teacher load.

Fifth area - finances. Bugets, unit costs, salaries, and related matters.

Sixth - goals and objectives. The college's image, philosophy, standards and objectives receive consideration.

Seventh -instruction. This includes questions of instructional effectiveness, class size, programmed instruction, and space utilization.

Eight - public relations and development. Included are: community publications, special events, planning and alumni.

Ninth, and final, area - students. Inquiries relating to follow-up of transfer students, student success, analysis of studdnt population, student follow-up, dropouts, follow-up of terminal program graduates, student activities, student load - employment - and study habits.

In addition to the above-listed items, another valuable source for obtaining timely topics has been the periodic, informal circularization of staff and faculty personnel. They have been invited to offer suggestions for research projects which they believe might be of value in their own work or other dimensions of college operations. This has resulted in a two-fold benefit. Through such participation these other professional personnel have developed a keener sense of identification and interest in the college's institutional research effort. Further - it has also served as a fruitful source of timely research topics.

Although it is recognized that the volume of research documents may not necessarily be a valid criterion for judging program effectiveness, it does reveal the extent, or intensity level of the IR effort. Over the past 15 years, some 153 Office of Research written documents have been accepted for publication in 39 diverse professional journals. During this same period a total of 661 research documents; i.e. Institutional Research Reports; Research Memorandums; and published articles, were written. The subjects of these various reports were subsumed under eight rubrics: I= Alumnae achievements& parents comments;

II= College curricula, programs, and other characteristics; III= Faculty comments; IV= Student academic achievement; V= Student characteristics; VI= Student comments, views and evaluations; VII= Freshman applications; and VIII= Miscellaneous reports.

The various institutional research studies carried out during these years may be groupsed into three broad categories: survey research (38%) - this typically involved either the collection of data by questionnaires, analysis of records, or interviews, from various samples, or total populations. The second groups is experimental research (50%). In this group are studies employing experimental manipulation of selected independent variables, often utilizing experimental and control groups to note what effects, if any, occurred in the criterion, or dependent, variables. The third group consists of historical research (12%). Inquries in this area have involved the use of historical data to answer specific questions by securing accurate information through careful examination and statistical treatment of data.

Speaking of statistical treatment of data, as someone once observed; statistics can be like a ventriloquist's dummy - thye can be made to say whatever the manipulator wants to say. Fortunately, the statistics utilized at Harcum have been more valid - they have consisted of two broad categorizes. One, descriptive statistics, has included the various methods for summarizing and communicating results, such as statistics for samples which describe specific characteristics of data, or statistics serving the function of summarizing important aspects of controlled observations of individuals, or analysis of records.

Such descriptive statistics include measures of central tendencies, such as median, mode, and average; measures of variability, such as the standard deviation, average deviation, and coefficient of variation; and measures of degree of interacting relationships between two or more data items - to include tne various coefficients of correlation.

The second broad measurements category include inferential statistics. These

have involved the making of generalizations from a given set of observations to a larger set of potential observations through the application of such statistical significance tests as "t-test" and "Chi-square test".

Probably the most significant fact to bear in mind about such statistics is that a statistical relationship between two variables does not necessarily indicate that one variable causes the other. For example, over the past 30 years there has been a positive correlation between the number of churches in the United States and the amount of liquor consumed: both have increased ! The cirrelation is high, and positive ! However, this correlation in no sense implies that churches cause liquor consumption, nor does it means that increased liquor consumption causes an increase in the number of churches built. The reason, of course, for this high, positive correlation is undoubtedly the general increase in both the population and the wealth of the country. With more people and more money, the purchase of many things has increased, among them churches and liquor consumption, two non-causally related facts !

Turning to the major techniques and methods employed at Harcum as data collecting devices for the IR program, these have included: Before-and-after evaluations; Checklists; Correlation studies; Interviews - both structured and open-ended; Inventories - both personality and skills; Observation methods - usually following a scheduled checklist; Parallel group surveys; Questionnaire and opionaires; Rating and ranking schedules; Statistical treatment of records data; and Tests.

It has been noted that very few junior colleges with IR programs have developed any way of evaluating the effectiveness of their efforts. Perhaps what follows may be described by some as being subjective, or non-scientific, assessments. Pragmatically, however, these various evaluation judgements have yielded meaningful results at Harcum - they have therefore been adjudged to be useful !

The first assessment refuls the views of a Middle States accreditation

team. It noted ...."all at Harcum were convinced of the value of self-evaluation, that is, institutional research. This process will undoubedly be continues." The team also went on to note that the task of long-range planning at Harcum would be made easier because of the fine work done by the office of institutional research. In their words ..."We became convinced that this information about the present would form a sound basis for long-range planning." They concluded by observing ..."Every institution must ask itself how well it is achieving its objectives. The question can never be answered to the complete satisfaction of those who ask it. However, Harcum has certain indications, through its institutional research efforts, that it is achieving its aims."

The second assessment reflects the views of Harcum's president, Dr. Michael A.Duzy. In connection with the above-cited report, he noted ..."An outstanding feature was found to be the college's office of institutional research. Harcum is probably unique among junior colleges in its extensive program of institutional research. No other activity on the campus keep trustees, faculty, administration, and students alert to what is being done."

The third assessment was offered by the Harcum faculty and staff. They were circularized, anonymously, to ascertain their rating of the IR efforts at the College. Some 90% responded as follows: valued the research reports as "exceptional" = 20%; assessed as being of "great value" = 20%; of "some value" = 52%; of "little value" = 4%; and of "no value" = 4%. It is therefore evident that virtually all respondents, (some 92%), rated the IR reports as being of "some" to "exceptional" value.

The fourth assessment, indicating student interest in the IR information, was evidenced in the fact that the student newspaper, without any pressure from the College, has carried information drawn from IR reports. In this connection, it is germane to note that Harcum IR reports have received very wide distribution - to faculty, students, staff, administration, trustees, alumnae,

parents of students, and others expressing interest in the Harcum IR program. Also of note - students have consistently expressed interest in reviewing the results of the various student questionnaires soliciting their views, comments, and evaluations. In addition, numerous informal student contacts, such as just dropping by to 'rap', has indicated at least an awareness that the Office of Research existed.

On the basis of these various assessments, as well as informal feedback received from various members of the Harcum Board of Trustees, it has been the general concensus of college management that the IR effort at Harcum has been of practical value and benefit to the College. In effect, their views reflect what Stewart Marcey concluded when he said: "Education has become big business. Institutional Research is becoming increasingly important. Today enlightened educational leaders use the most advanced management techniques. In this setting, institutional research is a must."

At Harcum, the decision makers continue to improve methods for operating the college. As a consequence, the rationale for conducting institutional research is crystal clear and compelling. Because of a progressive, innovative management, IR has moved into the mainstream of college operations. Becoming directly involved in filling information gaps, it has become relevant to college concerns and operations. It has embraced the entire spectrum of research inquiry, conclusions, recommendations, decisions, and planned activities. In short, it has participated in all of the necessary steps prior to management decisions to implement new policies or modify existing ones.

Although it may be axiomatic, it is pertinent to note that the essential function of institutional self-evaluation - through institutional research - can only be meaningful to the extent that it receives the wholehearted, enthusiastic support of executive management. Without such support, objective evaluation is either an impossibility or a rather pointless charade of 'window dress-

ing'. At Harcum, tne level of endorsement by executive management may be characterized by one word - total" Freedom of inquiry, financial support, and follow-up of research findings have been the touchstone of management's response to, and support of, institutional research at the College. Being a private, independent, rather than a public, tax-supported community college, financial support of Harcum's IR program is fully, and solely, determined by college executives.

Disseminating the written reports reflecting the IR program has posed several problems ebacsue of the diversified backgrounds of the various 'publics' to whom they are made available: to inform them effectively has been a challenging communications assignment. Routinely, the Office of Research IR reports and other documents are reviewed with respect to the following two questions: 1- what aspects of a particular research study should be disseminated to whom?, and 2- what is the most appropriate form of dissemination?

Research information at Harcum has been disseminated among nine 'publics', and nine different types of documents are made available to them. These documents have included: Insitutional Research Reports; Research Memorandums: Keeping Up With Harcum(a monthly newsletter to high school counselors); Patches (a Harcum bulletin-magazine distributed semi-annually to alumnae, parents, staff and faculty); The Harcum News (the student newspaper); the weekly Harcum Bulletin (distributed to all college personnel and students; Resources in Education abstracts (a quarterly faculty publication; selected published articles from the Office of Research.

The nine 'publics'receiving these documents include: students; faculty; administration and staff; Board of Trustees; alumnae; students' parents; incoming freshmen; high school guidance counselors; and non-Harcum academic community leaders requesting information.

Someone once noted that a budget is the most important statement of a college's educational philosophy. The financial support of institutional research

should not be left to chance. If IR is deemed to be an important college staff function, specific provision for it must be included in the budget. At Harcum there is a pragmatic answer to the question - "Why institutional research?" It has been that increasing numbers of junior colleges have found, through such research effort, practical ways to identify their problems. Through such better understanding, the first major steps are taken toward improving existing programs and operations, as well as developing a sound data base to plan intelligently for the future. In a word - institutional self-study is an absolute necessity if a junior college is to avoid the twin pitfalls of complacency and misdirection. As one educational researcher has observed... "I am impressed by how little we know with any certainty about the outcomes of various educational treatments. This fact serves as a stimulus for me to seek ways through research for making education a more potent force in the lives of the individual and society".

One final aphorism - "Haste Makes Waste". Most innovative programs, including IR programs, have been plagued by the tendency of both observers and participants to want to see immediate and visible results. We suffer from the habit, as former Commissioner of Education Howard Hall indicated, of pulling up a plant by the roots every few months in order to see that it is alive and growing !

In the final analysis, institutional research is very much like a stethescope. It permits one to 'listin in' on the vital organs of a college. And yet, tne collection and processing of IR data must never be permitted to become ends in themselves, for these are only tools to help in management planning and decision-making: they are not replacement for human judgement !

No one - I repeat - no one can take the ultimate weight of decision-making from the shoulders of management personnel. But obviously, the more that management people know of how things really are, the lighter this burden may be.

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